Book review: Christopher Wright (2013), The Echo of Things. The Lives of Photographs in the Solomon Islands. Durham, London, Duke University Press

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Wright, Christopher. 2013. *The Echo of Things. The Lives of Photographs in the Solomon Islands*. Durham, London: Duke University Press. 240 pp. Pb.: $27.95. ISBN: 9780822355106.

This book is a collection of four chapters, some of them already published elsewhere, and focused on photographic attitudes and practices in villages located on Roviana Lagoon, New Georgia, in the Western Solomon Islands. The first chapter (*The Men of the Boat*) deals with colonial photography, its production and local reception, at the turn of the 20th century, and discusses the reality of the islanders' "first contact" with photography. Chapter 2 (*A Devil's Engine*) examines the local expectations and practices of the medium throughout the 20th century, again by questioning the status of photography as a "modern" technique imposed on "savage" people by dominant outsiders. Chapter 3 (*Photographic Resurrection*) is concerned with the role of photography as establishing a link between the living and the dead and shows how photography, as a mnemonic practice, is connected to 'preexisting Roviana processes of memorialization' (p. 15). Chapter 4 (*Histories*) discusses the way historical photographs from the colonial past are being appropriated and thus contribute to the writing of history from a local point of view. In the book's *Prologue* and *Epilogue*, the author to discusses his method and approach.

The book owes much to the anthropology of photography initiated by authors such as Elizabeth Edwards and Christopher Pinney. It is a very good example of what an 'ethnography of photography' (p. 17) should be: Wright is not only interested in the content of images, but in the "lives" of photographs as material objects produced by specific agents using specific techniques, looked at, touched, and transmitted within specific local configurations, their meaning being constantly subject to change. Methodologically speaking, this implies archival research on the social and political conditions of production of colonial photography and on its reception, interviews with local people regarding their attitudes towards historical and contemporary photographs, and observation of their practices both as producers and consumers of photographs.

A central concern of the author is to 'question the normative value of Euro-American models of photography and to "provincialize" these through an ethnography of Roviana photographic practices' (p. 13). Is photography a universal phenomenon? Does it have an identity as a medium? Are its expectations the same all over the world? (p. 60). The Solomon Islands case study is particularly pertinent here as photography is clearly an imported practice, whose introduction can be rather precisely documented (Chapters 1 and 2). Wright warns us however of the risk of considering local practices and attitudes through a schematic opposition between "modern" and "pre-modern" understandings of photography. Not only have Roviana people been able to understand and use the medium from the beginning (which means that the idea of photography was not alien to their visual culture), but the so-called Western understanding of photography, Wright argues, is not deprived of ideas of magic and ghosts commonly reported in narratives of non-European peoples' first contact with photography. 'For Roviana people,' Wright concludes, 'photography is a way of mediating modernity through mimetic practices, but there is a sense in which photography is not new for them. It is connected to previously existing visual and memorial formations' (p. 193).

The book offers a stimulating discussion of colonial photography and suggests that this is not only 'a matter of Europeans imposing their own fantasies, their colonial vision, on docile populations' (p. 32): on the other side of the colonial encounter, local people were able to construct their own images, or at least to play with them, for instance by responding to the European obsessions about headhunting and cannibalism. Wright also shows how photography was used by Christians missionaries to transform savage bodies into "Christian" bodies and suggests that contemporary attitudes towards old photographs reproduce this temporal shift between savage ancestors and today's population. The book thus covers a whole range of issues related to the effects of photography on the formation of social groups. There are inspiring paragraphs on family photography and love photographs, whose circulation and conservation in albums are very similar to Euro-American practices (chapter 2), on the way photography has led to an 'increasing individualization of memory' compared to collective modes of telling the past (chapter 3), and on the articulation between photographs and other 'processual monuments,' such as skull shrines (p. 145).

Apart from being a detailed ethnographic account of the role of photographs in the lives of Roviana people, *The Echo of Things* is a highly valuable contribution to the study of vernacular photography which, due to scholars such as Geoffrey Batchen, has become so central to the history of photography. Its reading can thus be recommended to all those interested in the relations between photography and anthropology and in the current debates on the "nature" and "identity" of photography.

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